



## **United States Mission to the OSCE**

### **Statement on Human Rights Defenders: Challenges, Obstacles and Opportunities**

As prepared for delivery by Dr. Cathering Kuchta-Helbling  
U.S. State Department, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor  
to the Supplemental Human Dimension Meeting on Human Rights Defenders,  
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Thank you, Mr. Moderator.

Despite participating States' OSCE commitments, many governments continue to harass, threaten, and arrest human rights defenders. Sadly, countries that could benefit the most from the vital work of human rights defenders often repress them, depriving their citizens of internationally recognized human rights and fomenting long-term discontent and instability.

Given that those attending this meeting are very familiar with the diverse mechanisms of repression, I'd like to focus on how we can work together to support human rights defenders and advance democratic reform.

Strategies of field missions, other OSCE institutions, and participating States need to be well-designed, well-targeted, and well-coordinated. To begin with, it is unacceptable that some participating States continue to resist human dimension activities asserting that it is tantamount to interference in internal affairs—this view is blatantly at odds with solemn OSCE commitments.

In Istanbul in 1999, participating States agreed that OSCE commitments are “matters of immediate and legitimate concern to all participating States.” We should continue to bolster the human dimension activities of OSCE field missions. We need to provide diplomatic support within the OSCE when human dimension aspects of the field missions' mandates are under threat and if necessary remind all OSCE members that the human dimension is an integral and indivisible component of lasting security and a core OSCE principle that we can not afford to marginalize.

We also need to ensure that each field mission has the necessary financial, technical and human resources necessary to promote democracy and human rights. In addition to promoting a robust OSCE budgetary allocation for human dimension activities, each participating State should do its part to provide voluntary contributions for human dimension projects and to second quality staff to serve in field missions.

OSCE participating States should vigorously urge the repeal of onerous laws and regulations restricting the freedom of NGOs, human rights and democracy advocates, and the lawyers who defend them. We need to make it clear that governments should not be allowed to condone such repression by calling it the “rule of law,” when in fact it is “rule by law.” This is simply using democratic terminology to mask authoritarian abuse.

We need to continue submitting laws to OSCE legal experts who evaluate whether laws conform with OSCE commitments. When laws fall short we need to press governments and offer technical assistance to bring legislation in line with OSCE principles. We should also continue to raise concerns about the treatment of NGOs with host governments and support legal assistance for NGOs and human rights defenders.

We need to do more to end repression of media freedom. We need to vigorously promote implementation of the OSCE Special Representative on Media Freedom's country-specific recommendations. The OSCE field missions and participating States should support training, media production assistance, and building management capacity in media outlets.

The United States supported Central Asia's first independent printing press that contributed to media freedom in Kyrgyzstan. The European Union, many of its members and others gathered here have made similar efforts in other countries. But we all can do more.

We should also think creatively: When it is not possible to improve access to information and independent media in host countries, we should consider providing such access by supporting out-of-country independent radio and satellite networks like the US and EU are doing for the people of Belarus.

We also need to continue to offer more diplomatic, moral and emergency support to human rights defenders. This includes raising individual cases internationally and bilaterally at the highest levels; meeting regularly with human rights defenders and democracy advocates; attending their trials and visiting them in prison if necessary, as well as providing them with emergency material assistance so that they can continue their work. We should provide funds so that human rights defenders can attend OSCE meetings and shed international light on their concerns.

We should also increase training to help youth and other human rights defenders build broad constituencies to monitor and advocate effectively for these rights and hold governments accountable. Human rights defenders themselves need to coordinate their efforts for common goals and establish networks to aid in survival and enhance advocacy efforts. OSCE participating States that have recently transitioned to democracy should make a full-fledged effort to impart their knowledge and strategies to help human rights defenders in authoritarian regimes or incipient democracies advance rights and freedoms.

We must continue to support projects that promote the incorporation of human rights education into established school curricula. It is essential that the next generation of leaders know their rights and obligations.

Field missions and participating States should support a variety of women's empowerment programs, featuring capacity-building and training for women's rights NGOs and aspiring women leaders. Initiatives in legal education for women are critical to equip women with the tools to press for systematic reform.

Supporting human rights defenders should be a core component of the OSCE's mission to foster stability and security. We should not accept that somehow supporting the work of human rights defenders should be subservient to other competing interests.

As Secretary Rice has said, the United States will not compromise its promotion of democracy and human rights for security interests. Indeed, the U.S. sees the two as one and the same: Stability, prosperity, and security hinge on robust democratic societies that respect human rights, the rule of law, and fundamental freedoms. It is each participating States' responsibility to facilitate the work of human right defenders, for their work helps us achieve our stated goals.

Thank you.